

Dead Ideas in Teaching and Learning Podcast Series

Season 3, Episode 2: Why Educating for Wholeness, Social Justice, and Liberation *Is* the Future of Higher Education: A Conversation with Laura I. Rendón
Center for Teaching and Learning, Columbia University

Catherine Ross ([00:00](#)):

Welcome to Dead Ideas in Teaching and Learning. I'm Catherine Ross, Executive Director of the Center for Teaching and Learning at Columbia. I'm speaking today with Dr. Laura Rendón. As a quick reminder for our listeners, in this podcast series we are exploring dead ideas in teaching and learning, in other words, ideas that are widely believed, though not true, and that drive many systems and behaviors in connection to teaching, exercising what Diane Pike called the tyranny of dead ideas.

Catherine Ross ([00:41](#)):

Dr. Laura Rendón is Professor Emeritus at the University of Texas, San Antonio. She is nationally recognized as an education theorist, activist, and researcher who specializes in college preparation, persistence, and graduation of low income, first generation students. A native of Laredo, Texas, Dr. Rendón's passion is assisting students who, like her, grew up in poverty with hopes and dreams, but not knowing how to realize them. She is credited with developing the theory of validation, which colleges and researchers have employed as a framework for working with and affirming low income students. Dr. Rendón is also a teaching and learning philosopher and thought leader. She is the author of the book *Sentipensante, Sensing, Thinking Pedagogy, Educating for Wholeness, Social Justice, and Liberation*, in which she developed a pedagogic framework that emphasizes intellectual, social, emotional, and spiritual student development, along with incorporating social activism.

Catherine Ross ([01:54](#)):

Welcome to our Dead Ideas Podcast, Laura. It is such an honor to have you as our guest today.

Laura Rendón ([02:01](#)):

Such a pleasure to join you, Catherine. Thank you so much for the invitation, and I want to begin with an expression of unity and commonality. In the Maya culture there's this beautiful term called "in lak'ech", which means, "I am another you". This is similar to other terms used throughout the world, in Africa, for example, they have a term "Ubuntu", the Lakota have "to all of my relations", and I just learned in the Islamic tradition, they have a beautiful term called "alamea" which relates to witness, being together. The whole idea that we are never alone and that we're individuals but we're also a part of the greater collective. So it's just a pleasure to join you as another person who is aligned with the ideas that we're going to be speaking about today. So to you and to the audience that is listening to the podcast, in lak'ech.

Catherine Ross ([03:10](#)):

That is so beautiful. Thank you so much for that lovely opening. Let me just give our listeners a little bit of background here. In 2009 I read Dr. Rendón's book, *Sentipensante*, and it literally changed everything I thought I knew about higher education, as well as deeply influencing my role as an educational developer. The work just inspired my work for decades now, literally, and it occurred to me recently that as we're thinking about our collective return to campus, still going through this pandemic, that we really

need Sentipensante pedagogy now more than ever. And while Dr. Rendón has been doing this work of changing higher ed for decades also, maybe now is the time. Maybe now higher ed is finally ready to embrace her vision of what teaching should look like as we return and we think about how we recover and reflect and reframe our expectations of normal.

Catherine Ross ([04:30](#)):

So my first question, Laura, is about your 2009 introduction. You wrote in your introduction to the book, and I quote here, "The purpose of this book is to assist in guiding the transformation of teaching and learning in higher education so that it is unitive in nature, emphasizing the balanced, harmonic relationship between two concepts such as intellectualism and intuition, teaching and learning, the learner and the learning material, the western and non-western ways of knowing. I seek to shatter the belief system that has worked against wholeness, multiculturalism, and social justice." Those are powerful words. So here we are, 12 years on in a global pandemic later. What would you say now in your introduction?

Laura Rendón ([05:31](#)):

Well thank you for embracing my work, first of all, Catherine. That means a great deal to me. I've also learned over time as I developed into wisdom, which is a constant process as you well know, that sometimes ideas take a while to take hold. There's some that go out there and people latch onto them fairly quickly, but there are other ideas that take a long time. It's been 12 years since Sentipensante, Sensing, Thinking Pedagogy has been released, and so much has happened in the world since then, in particular over the last year and a half. So there are a few things that come to mind in relationship to how do we move forward with the ideas expressed in Sentipensante Pedagogy.

Laura Rendón ([06:27](#)):

Number one of course is that we need to recognize that the world is getting much more complex, much more fragmented. We're at a loss for some solutions for some very pressing equity and justice issues that confront the world. For example, we haven't dealt well with issues of racism, issues of sexism, issues of homophobia, issues of how we treat low income communities and issues of poverty. We're dealing as we speak with Afghanistan and the chaos that has ensued there. This speaks to this whole notion of what kind of an education do students need to have to help us work with and solve these complex problems? Is the education that we provided students in the past the best way to proceed? I say no. I think that there's some good things about what we've done in the past, but certainly there are some things that we need to do better. So that's one issue that I would bring forth.

Laura Rendón ([07:45](#)):

The second one is of course to shatter the falsehoods that are so entrenched in the academy, some that actually lead to harm. For example, we spoke about some of them, privilege for example, thinking over sensing, knowledge over wisdom, the deficit model as opposed to the asset based model. On and on, I invite listeners to think about some of these entrenched falsehoods. In a sense they're not dead, really because they're aligned in our consciousness, these beliefs are being held in mass consciousness. They're alive in our minds, they're alive in our system, and we perpetuate them, sometimes unknowingly. We validate them, we reward them. They're so entrenched that even if we have the courage to go against them, there will be a backlash for us in terms of even challenging these notions.

Laura Rendón ([08:54](#)):

And we need to realize that the model is really not working. All we have to do is look at student outcomes, particularly for underserved student populations, first and second year retention rates, for example, even five and six year retention rates, particularly in STEM fields of study. If everything was working, we would have 90% of students or more achieving their hopes and dreams, but we don't have that. So something is not right. So we have a system that I believe is contaminated with these falsehoods, these lies as Don Miguel Ruiz would put it. And we have an opportunity here, I think one of the gifts of the pandemic if I may call it that because I know there's terrible things happening, but I think there's some inherent gifts in the pandemic, and one of them is the ability to just pause and reflect and begin to really take stock of everything that we've done. What has worked, what hasn't, where did we go wrong, what do we need to do now to move forward.

Laura Rendón ([10:06](#)):

And I believe that it begins with us really addressing some key questions that can guide us forward. Listeners will come up with their own questions, but what are the competencies that are needed now for our students to be really intelligent, of course we want them to know facts and figures and critical thinking and problem solving. We want them to be super intelligent, but we also want them to be compassionate humanitarians. We want them to be bridge builders. We want them to be able to step into the world of the other. We want them to function with a critical consciousness in terms of addressing societal inequalities. So what are some of these competencies that students need to have? And then what are some of the tools that we might employ to engage students in deep learning experiences? To foster what Gloria Anzaldúa calls "conocimiento", this high level of enlightenment that can be accessed through creative tools and practices.

Laura Rendón ([11:21](#)):

And then I think we also need to reflect on ourselves. This isn't just about content and strategy, it's about self knowledge. Parker Palmer, in his book, *The Courage to Teach*, talks about who is the self that teaches. So I believe that we need to really have the courage to look inside ourselves and to what extent have we stood against these entrenched narratives that guide higher education? To what extent do we hold an oppressor within us? What do we need to change? Can we face our shadow side? How do we become these new knowledge warriors that are going to step up and really create a workable model of education that works not just for some but for all students, and particularly those that have been underserved that continue to have some challenges within our educational system. How do we do all of that? We have a big assignment in front of us.

Catherine Ross ([12:40](#)):

We do, and I couldn't agree with you more that these systems and beliefs are deeply, I think you used the term powerful, and deeply entrenched. I think of them as our legacy in higher education, and as often the case with legacy, it stays with us, but it's rarely ever examined in the light of day. It stays sort of buried underground. It's there but people don't see it. it's invisible to them, and I think that's where the dead ideas metaphor spoke to me that we need to actively unearth these beliefs, because as a legacy passed from one generation of teachers to another, things never get examined in a deep way, because we are all operating under these beliefs about what's normal. It's just normal pedagogy.

Laura Rendón ([13:44](#)):

Absolutely. Yes. It's almost like a hidden curriculum that exists, so we need to illuminate that curriculum, expose it for what it is, and then we can deal with that. Otherwise we just keep moving along almost

robotically and without thinking, and you're right. It is a generational thing as well. I believe it was James Baldwin that said the past is the present. So what's happening now has happened in the past, and our generation is then given the opportunity to solve these issues, and if we don't solve them, then we pass them along to the generation coming behind us. We always have to think about those coming behind us, what are we leaving for them? If we don't solve, for example, the issue of climate change, which is causing havoc throughout the world as we speak, then the next generation is tasked with doing that, and if they don't do it, then the generation behind them. So yes, I agree with you that these falsehoods are widely entrenched, but they're also widely accepted unfortunately, widely practiced. And we've got to expose them.

Catherine Ross ([15:09](#)):

Well I am so happy to do that work with you. So I think perhaps a concrete example might help our listeners better grasp what you and I are talking about, the work that needs to be done, and I think the agreement you identified as the separation agreement which is that instructors are separated from students, disciplines are separated from each other, students are separated from each other. That agreement in particular touches on so much of the teaching and learning behaviors that we consider normal, I thought it would be really interesting for the audience if we could unpack some of the underlying tenants of the separation agreement that you identified in your book. So I will just name the tenant and ask you to think about what you were just saying, that we need to change these things, here's some really concrete things, what should we do differently?

Catherine Ross ([16:18](#)):

So one of the underlying subtenants of the separation agreement is that teaching and learning are linear, information flows primarily from teacher to student.

Laura Rendón ([16:33](#)):

Yes. That separation agreement is firmly, deeply entrenched. But let me backtrack a little bit to indicate to you that that chapter in my book where I expose some of these belief systems or agreements as I call them, that chapter is inspired by Don Miguel Ruiz and his book *The Four Agreements*. I remember when I read his book, he's got a beautiful quote which says, "If we can see it is our agreements that rule our life, and we don't like the dream of life, we need to change the agreements." So when I first read that I was like whoa, what is he saying here? And essentially something very simple and yet very important, that if we can see that it's these narratives that are ruling our life, our academy, and we don't like those agreements, we don't like that narrative, we just need to change it. That's essentially what he's saying. And he's basically saying if we want to function well in the world, there are only four agreements that we need to follow.

Laura Rendón ([17:41](#)):

Be impeccable with your word, speak with integrity, for example, don't take anything personally, and that's kind of hard to do at times. Another one that's kind of hard to do is don't make assumptions. I've learned that most times assumptions are incorrect. And then always do your best. So reading that book taught me more about transformation and about illuminating these narratives than anything else that I have read. So I just want to give credit to Don Miguel Ruiz and his beautiful book, *The Four Agreements*.

Laura Rendón ([18:18](#)):

The other thing that comes to mind here as a way of context is that in many ways we are dealing with the resolution of dualities. That we tend to see the world in either/or ways, and what is being offered to us, for example, when we look at the duality of teaching and learning is not so much that we see either teaching or learning, but how these two concepts actually work in oppositional complementary. They're opposites, but yet they complement each other. So looking at these concepts of teaching and learning students, et cetera, allows us to then really become aware of what's inherent in those dualities, and that sometimes there's something more that comes out of those dualities, like a third reality, for example, that I'll speak to in a minute.

Laura Rendón ([19:33](#)):

So you asked about teaching and learning being linear, as an agreement, a narrative that is in place in higher education. So I believe that teaching and learning exist in relationship. They're intertwined. Teachers can be learners, learners can be students. I just wrote the forward to a new book called *The Courage to Learn*. *The Courage to Learn* is co-authored by Paul Michael and Marcia Eames-Sheavly. It's the companion text to Parker Palmer's book *The Courage to Teach*, and basically in *The Courage to Teach*, Parker questioned the false choice represented when people ask what's more important, teaching or learning? He basically said hold those two concepts in tension and see what you learn from that. But he also asked who is the self that teaches? And for us to really become self reflective and work on our inner life skills. So teaching and learning can flow both ways, it's the opposite narrative to that.

Catherine Ross ([20:52](#)):

I think there's a quote by Paulo Freire that says, "Whoever teaches learns in the act of teaching, and whoever learns teaches in the act of learning." Which I feel like captures what you just said, right? It can never be a one way system. It's a constant, circular system that feeds itself.

Laura Rendón ([21:22](#)):

Absolutely. You're absolutely right.

Catherine Ross ([21:26](#)):

So another tenant, underlying tenant, and maybe I'll give you a couple here because they are kind of related. Faculty should keep a distance between themselves and their students, and faculty outreach to students such as validation, caring, or encouragement is considered a form of, and this is a quote, coddling students who are presumed to be adults and should be strong enough to survive a collegiate environment on their own.

Laura Rendón ([21:58](#)):

If there's one thing that we've learned from the pandemic, it's the importance of relationships and how we meet each other. When the world shut down and we were by ourselves, we realized how much we needed each other. When loved ones around us began to get ill and some paid the ultimate price, we wanted to be close to them. We wanted to really get in touch with others and we found ways to do that. People became very creative in doing that. Birthday parties with cars riding by, people singing from the balconies in Italy, we became very creative at forming relationships while staying distanced. There again are the polarities and how they complement each other.

Laura Rendón ([22:59](#)):

And there's a new book out by two good colleagues of mine, Peter Felten and Leo Lambert, and it's called Relationship Rich Education. And basically they interviewed students, many students in higher ed. And the key thing that came out for them that was foundational to student success was the importance of relationships. So faculty should keep a distance between themselves and students, it's not really what we need to have. We need to have a model where faculty establish authentic, caring relationships, validating relationships as I would call them, with students. And I often get when I give workshops, and I speak about the importance of relationships and validation, faculty will ask isn't that coddling students? Isn't that pampering them? Shouldn't we be tougher with them? And it's important to know that we're not talking about making students weaker here, we're actually talking about making them stronger.

Laura Rendón ([24:14](#)):

When I see programs such as The Puente Project in California and Catch The Next Project here in Texas, that are validation rich projects, I don't see weak students. They started out, especially low income, first generation students, that come to college and sometimes they don't even know what questions to ask. They need someone, especially that first semester, those first weeks in the semester, they need someone to reach out to them and let them know that I'm here for you. I want to help you. I think you can succeed. You can do science. These are the kinds of validating statements and practices.

Laura Rendón ([25:02](#)):

The other thing I've learned about validation is that it has a long lasting impact. When I asked faculty and staff, can you think of the person or persons who have been there for you in your life, the people who you can turn to, the people who lift you up, and they talk about their parents, they talk about their kids, they talk about a mentor, they talk about a coach, whoever it is, that relationship may have happened 10, 15, 20 years ago, but they still remember it today, and that is the impact of that validating relationship. So instead of separation, let's talk about relationships, let's talk about really working within a paradigm where we adhere to the notion that we're relational human beings, and we learned that in the pandemic. All the sudden we were like wow, we need each other.

Catherine Ross ([26:08](#)):

We certainly did, and I think students demanded it in some ways, in maybe a way they hadn't previously sitting in a classroom, they recognized – at least some of the students I spoke with in this podcast series, they recognized that they needed that community and they needed the connection to their professor. Even when I ask some students, because many schools like Columbia went to pass fail grading; which "grading motivating learning" is another one of Diane's dead ideas, right? And I asked students what happened to their motivation for learning with the switch to pass fail, and they said that they actually found it freeing in that they could pursue questions they were passionate about, they could be more honest about their own work and noting the flaws in it because they weren't going to be risking their grade point average, and that what really motivated them and they saw this in their peers as well, was the relationship they had with the professor. That they didn't want to let the instructor down because that relationship was so valuable to them. So I think your words are spot on for how the pandemic has really shone a light on this need.

Laura Rendón ([27:38](#)):

That's a very powerful statement that the students made that they didn't want to let the instructor, the teacher down. That's exactly what I've heard when I speak to low income students in a project that is so validation rich, and when I ask them so why are you still in college while others have left? They'll say

we're in disbelief that we're getting this here, and we owe it to them to stay. We don't want to let them down. If they're doing all of this for us, we owe it to them to not drop out. So that's the power of these validating relationships that we often overlook, unfortunately.

Catherine Ross ([28:27](#)):

Yes. And I think in a related question that I have, it's also tied to some very deeply entrenched beliefs about merit and how students succeed or don't in our systems and our beliefs around teaching and learning. You note in your book in *Sentipensante* that there is a scientific origin for this idea that there is a kind of survival of the fittest and that somehow in higher education we've adopted this agreement where we privilege competition over collaboration, right? Over the relationship building collaborative ways of teaching and learning, competition is what is highly valued and we call that merit, and I think it's important to unpack this idea of merit because it sort of represents a whole bunch of other dead ideas, that instructors can feel like their teaching is a separate thing from the student learning, and if the students don't learn it's because the students have deficits. It's a student problem, right? Because they don't see the teaching and learning unity that you described.

Catherine Ross ([29:59](#)):

So I think even Carl Wieman, the Nobel Laureate physicist who spent more than 20 years probably trying to change how science is taught, I asked him what's the biggest barrier to getting instructors to change their teaching, and he said the idea that it's always their students who are the problem. So it's a very powerful, deeply entrenched idea. So I'm curious, this idea of merit, it drives everything, right? Grading, how we assess students, credentialing, getting internships, all of these things are based on this. But how did higher ed ever decide that it was a good idea to weed out students as opposed to bringing students along and keeping them in disciplines?

Laura Rendón ([30:59](#)):

All ideas I believe they start somewhere, and then more and more people begin to believe in the ideas and then they just become a part of the mass consciousness, which tells me that we can also be a part of that mass consciousness by creating different ideas, different roots. So this whole notion of merit has a number of nuances attached to it that you've alluded to. The whole idea of competition. And the other side of competition is collaboration. So we've just over privileged I believe competition. And it's not that we're going to say let's do away entirely with competition. Certainly, we have competition in sports for example, but also even in sports there's collaboration. There's competition but there's collaboration.

Laura Rendón ([31:59](#)):

See how we're playing here with these dualities, and how they work together. And it also speaks to this notion of merit, who's dumb and who's smart, and who decides that? It also speaks to do we work with a model based on fear and intimidation, or do we work with a model based on inspiration and care and support. What is it that we're going to privilege more over the other, how are we going to work within those tensions? In the middle of those tensions I believe is something that Gloria Anzaldúa would call "nepantla" or liminality, being in an in between space. And we find ourselves in the nepantla right now. We've got one foot in the world of the past, and one foot in the world of the future. It's an extraordinary time. It's a crazy time for sure that we're experiencing, and somehow we were gifted by the universe I think with this pandemic that just shook the heck out of us, and we're still working to get out of it. We're in that middle liminal space, the nepantla. But that space has a lot of possibilities.

Laura Rendón (33:26):

That is the space of inquiry that allows us to now rethink and reanalyze and begin to see what do we want in this new future and how are we going to get to that. So I really need to, I agree with you, I think we need to interrogate these notions of merit and competition and we need to come up with a new narrative that is going to guide us in the future that makes more sense and that is going to lead us to really have the outcomes that we want with our students.

Catherine Ross (34:04):

I certainly hope that's the case and I'm happy to see how in some ways students have become more empowered through these difficult times as well. And I think that has potential for driving some real change in the academy.

Laura Rendón (34:23):

And I want to say something about the whole notion of deficits which I think is very, very important as well. You talked about Carl Wieman who indicates that sometimes we have a tendency to blame students for their learning failures, and that's the number one barrier to changing how science is taught. So wow, what does that tell you? I think that some disciplines, in particular STEM, they've become traumatizing experiences for students. I know some math faculty who were asking students to write auto ethnographies to talk about the trauma that they experienced in their math courses. And it speaks to faculty using the classroom to instill fear as opposed to inspiration, as opposed to lifting students up. And it also speaks, I believe, to some faculty working with a deficit based paradigm, particularly with low income, first generation students, many who are students of color, African American, and LatinX students, American Indian students, and sometimes some educators see their communities as having nothing to offer.

Laura Rendón (35:51):

See students who grew up in poverty as having way too many challenges, that they're not going to be successful, that they're always at risk, that they're lazy, that their parents don't care about education, on and on. That is a very entrenched narrative in not only higher ed but in K12 as well. What some of my colleagues and I have learned is that students from these communities have a lot of unrecognized strengths and misunderstood strengths. For example, they have navigational ability. They're coming to a new world of college that is very different from their whole realities and they've learned to navigate themselves within that new context. They have hopes, they have dreams, they have this beautiful asset that we call giving back, that they want to earn a college degree, they want to learn a lot, but it's not just to have a degree to hang on the wall, that's nice, they want to use their education to help their communities, to serve as role models for their family, to make this world a better place to live, so they want to be, for example, in Engineers Without Borders, and Doctors Without Borders.

Laura Rendón (37:22):

It's a beautiful asset. They have the asset of resistance. They've resisted poverty. They've resisted micro and macro aggressions coming at them all the time. They have the asset of resilience. They bounce back from many challenges that they've faced. So we need to recognize the assets that these students bring, and leverage those assets with what we do in higher education.

Catherine Ross (37:50):

Wow. Yes. That's all I can say, I second, third, fourth, and fifth that. I was hoping maybe as we wrap up here that you could share, I know you have many sources of information, but what really keeps you motivated to believe in the possibility of change in higher education?

Laura Rendón ([38:14](#)):

Well first of all, I've always been a hopeful person. I believe we always need to have hope. I've realized also that I may not see, in fact I don't think I'm going to see everything that I want to see changed in education in my lifetime. I'm an elder now, and I know that my time will be coming to a close. I'm not 30 or 40 years old anymore. I can say well I'm not going to see it so I'm going to give up, no, no, no. I may not see what I want to see, but at least I will know that I was a part of the process of creating the change that I seek to see. That really, really keeps me going as well. The honor of my life has been to serve as an advocate for students who grew up like me, in poverty and really helping them to realize all of their goals, all of their aspirations.

Laura Rendón ([39:28](#)):

So I'm inspired too by so many students that have had so many challenges in front of them, many more than I faced, and I'm like wow, and all of their accomplishments. They were told they can't succeed, they've been undocumented, they've had health challenges, they've experienced racism, they've experienced sexism, they've experienced many, many, many challenges, but they kept going. They kept going and I'm just so inspired by these students. I can't give up on them. I can't give up on them. I have to remain hopeful and I know that for sure that there is another generation that agrees with us and I think they're going to take us to where we want to be. It may not happen quickly, like I said earlier, these things sometimes they take time, but we can't give up hope.

Catherine Ross ([40:36](#)):

No, we can't. And I thank you for that. I also thank you for being part of my process of trying to change higher education. I also feel the impetus of age, and I just feel like your work has been so powerful and I don't expect to see it all change either but I know that it's making a difference and your influence has been profound. So thank you so much for sharing your stories with us today.

Laura Rendón ([41:19](#)):

Muchísimas gracias, it's been a pleasure to join you, Catherine, and so excited that you're doing this work. So keep on doing what you're doing.

Catherine Ross ([41:29](#)):

I'm going to try.

Catherine Ross ([41:35](#)):

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